

COMMUNICATION SKILLS RESOURCE PACKET

MAY 2009

YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Good communication is a matter of give-and-take. Effective communication styles involve listening carefully to the other person and to your own responses. Poor communication styles tend to be one-sided. Review these statements and answer YES or NO depending on how they describe your style.

Yes No

1. When there's an argument, I get tough so my opponent will back down sooner.
2. I don't have to spell out procedures. People are smart enough to figure out what I want them to do.
3. I expect people to know when I'm speaking confidentially.
4. I may not always know the answer, but I feel it's my responsibility to act like I do.
5. If I sound more technical, it will give me more credibility.
6. Sometimes I know the answer to a problem, but I believe it's better to let the person figure it out on his or her own.
7. In conversations, I use my eyes as well as my ears to listen.
8. If I don't know what to say, I say nothing.
9. I pay attention to how I'm coming across and how the other person is responding, so I can improve my communication skills.
10. When I'm listening to someone, I take notes and ask lots of questions.

If you answered YES to items 1 - 5, these styles could backfire because:

1. Arguments rarely solve anything. You may overpower an "opponent" with harsh judgments and name calling, but it doesn't mean you've won. It's better to de-escalate, using phrases such as "I can see you have strong feelings" or "Let's summarize our main differences." If tempers are hot, it's better to set a time for further discussion when things have calmed down.
2. No matter how smart people are, they deserve a clear picture of the expected results. It will save them and you a lot of false starts and embarrassment.
3. If you don't feel comfortable telling someone you're speaking confidentially, don't discuss the matter at all. Avoid "confidential" revelations except when absolutely necessary.
4. Avoid the pitfall of having all the answers. Some alternatives: "I'll have to think about it"; "What do you think should be done?" or "I don't know, but maybe so-and-so does."
5. Using technical terms, jargon or complex words may not be the best way to get a message across if your audience doesn't understand. You don't have to impress your audience with big words and technical jargon. To gain credibility with your audience, you need to convey your message in terms they can easily understand.

YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE: ASSET OR LIABILITY? (Continued)

If you answered YES to items 6 – 10, these are good communication styles because:

6. Unless it's a simple procedural question, giving people a chance to draw their own conclusions can help them grow, and they'll be more likely to follow up on answers they find for themselves. There's often more than one right answer anyway.
7. Body language, tone of voice and phrasing say things that words don't say. A pleased expression and confident stance may tell you there's full agreement. A pained expression, a discouraged slump or nervous fidgeting can be an invitation to probe.
8. Saying nothing gives you a chance to think about the problem and how you want to respond to it. You don't always have to jump in immediately with a plan or solution.
9. No one is born with perfect communication skills. Be on the lookout for things you'd like to improve, whether it's too many "ya knows" or getting too many puzzled looks from the people you're talking to. If your communication is frequently misinterpreted, work on explaining more clearly and getting people to explain to you what they think you said.
10. Taking notes can help you remember what was said and help you organize it. Asking questions is a good way to clarify meaning and to let the speaker know you're listening and you understand.

THREE KEYS TO BETTER COMMUNICATION

There are three communication techniques that can help you with everyday communication and touchy topics that could escalate into confrontation. Asking questions, using "I" statements, and being specific can turn any situation into a win-win situation.

Find Out What's Going On

Always ask questions instead of jumping to conclusions. "Is there a particular reason why this project is behind schedule?" gives the person a chance to explain any extenuating circumstances before you take action.

Defuse With "I" Messages

Begin sentences with "I" instead of "you." For example, a sentence that begins "I need..." is easier for the other person to respond to positively than "You did..." or "You shouldn't..." "I need you to complete this task by Friday" is better than "You're behind schedule again." Beginning a sentence with "you" can put the other person on the defensive.

Be Specific

Being specific prevents misunderstandings and presents facts that are hard to argue with. Saying "You're not working fast enough" leaves the person wondering what's fast enough. But if you say "I noticed that you missed three deadlines last month and that's not acceptable," the person understands your limits and knows what to do.

HOW TACTFUL ARE YOU?

Tact is having the skills to know the right way to deal with people sensitively. When you communicate, how tactful are you? Assess your tactfulness by rating each statement on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always).

- _____ 1. I find the most positive possible way to give the message.
- _____ 2. I prepare to present my message clearly.
- _____ 3. I take into account the person's past and future behavior.
- _____ 4. I take into account whether the person is able to listen and respond thoughtfully at the time of the message.
- _____ 5. I take into account whether there are other people nearby who might make the person feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.
- _____ 6. I take the person's mood into account.
- _____ 7. I take into account how the time of day could affect the person.
- _____ 8. I notice the person's nonverbal clues and what they indicate about his or her response.
- _____ 9. I know when to stop talking.
- _____ 10. After the conversation, I look for ways to improve future communication.

Score

37-50: You're the picture of tact. Keep up the good work!

24-36: You understand the importance of tact and can use this quiz to further improve your skills.

10-23: You may not have realized the importance of tact in the timing, preparation and delivery of your message. Watch other people who are skilled in this area, study up and begin to improve your style.

Use this quiz as a checklist for future communications.

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